Name: _____ Date: _____

Victor Wembanyama and the Unanimous Vote

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1199 words

How did Victor Wembanyama become the NBA's Defensive Player of the Year? One answer is a single word: unanimous. When the 2026 award was announced on April 20, he had every first-place vote. That had never happened in the history of the award, and at 22 he was younger than any earlier winner, who had all been at least 23. This book follows the seasons that led to that vote. It also asks what the job of defense really is.

He is a big person, even for the NBA. Basketball-Reference lists him at 7 feet 4 inches and 235 pounds. In June 2023 the Spurs announced his official height, measured without shoes, as 7 feet 3 1/2 inches. His wingspan is the distance across his outstretched arms. It is widely reported as about 8 feet, but no official number has been published. He skipped the draft combine, because his team in France, Metropolitans 92, was still playing. The Spurs said their height measurement followed NBA guidelines.

On June 22, 2023, in Brooklyn, the Spurs chose him with the first pick of the draft. They had won the lottery for that pick five weeks earlier, with odds of 14 percent, after a season of 22 wins and 60 losses. The Spurs had held the top pick only twice before, taking David Robinson in 1987 and Tim Duncan in 1997. Wembanyama came to San Antonio from the top league in France, where he had played for Metropolitans 92 the year before.

In his first season he played 71 games and led the league with 3.6 blocks a game. He made 254 blocks and 128 three-pointers. No player had ever reached 250 blocks and 100 threes in one season before. He won Rookie of the Year with all 99 first-place votes. That spring, Basketball-Reference lists him second in the vote for Defensive Player of the Year. Chet Holmgren finished second in the Rookie of the Year vote that year.

In 2024-25 he made the All-Star team and averaged 3.8 blocks a game. In 2025-26 he averaged 25.0 points and 11.5 rebounds. He blocked 197 shots in all, and reports said his blocks a game led the league for a third season in a row. He finished third in the voting for Most Valuable Player. He also made the All-NBA and All-Defensive first teams. The award he won that spring honored the part of the game that points do not show.

What does a defender actually do? The NBA's stat glossary says a block happens when a defender tips a shot so it cannot score. It also counts contests. A contest is when a defender closes out on a shooter and raises a hand before the ball leaves the shooter's fingers. Blocks have a limit, set by the rule called goaltending. A defender may not touch a ball above the rim, inside the imaginary cylinder over the basket. He may not touch one coming down with a chance to score, either.

That is why the rim matters so much. It hangs 10 feet above the floor, and it is 18 inches wide inside, in front of a backboard 6 feet wide. Even at 7 feet 4 inches, a player stands below it. In October 2025, a reporter asked Wembanyama whether he hunts for blocks. He said he sometimes does even when he already has six, and added, "It's my job." A block is only one way to change a shot. The next screen shows another way.

Some of a defender's best work never shows up as a block. ESPN reported in May 2026 that shots against the Spurs came from an average of 15.8 feet away when Wembanyama was on the court. That was the farthest in the NBA. Over the whole season, shots against the Spurs averaged 14.9 feet. The report ends with Hall of Fame guard Dwyane Wade on players who try to size Wembanyama up: "They just go somewhere else."

A skill like that is built, not given. After his rookie season, he worked in San Antonio for about two months before the 2024 Olympics in Paris, and for another four or five weeks after them. Part of that work was with Jamal Crawford, a former NBA guard, on ball handling and on ways to create a shot. Wembanyama said of working with Crawford, "It was my first time working for this long with a retired actual NBA player." France won the silver medal at the Olympics in August.

Then came the 2026 playoffs. On April 19, the day before the award was announced, he played his first playoff game. He scored 35 points against Portland, which the NBA calls a Spurs record for a playoff debut, and his team won. In Game 4 of that series, in Portland, he blocked 7 shots. The Spurs won the series, 4 games to 1. Next up was Minnesota. In Game 1, on May 4, Wembanyama did something that no one in the league had ever done in a playoff game.

Game 1 of a best-of-seven series was in San Antonio, and he played 39 minutes and 52 seconds. He blocked 12 shots. The old playoff record for one game was 10. Three players shared it: Mark Eaton in 1985, Hakeem Olajuwon in 1990 and Andrew Bynum in 2012. Wembanyama also had 15 rebounds that night, but he scored only 11 points, and the Spurs lost, 104 to 102. A record can come on a night that ends the wrong way. The Spurs won the series, 4 games to 2.

Next came Oklahoma City. Game 1, on May 18, went to two overtimes, and he played 48 minutes and 42 seconds. Wembanyama had 41 points and 24 rebounds in a 122-115 win. The Spurs lost Games 2 and 3 and trailed in the series, two games to one, but they came back and won Game 7 in Oklahoma City, 111 to 103, on May 30. Wembanyama was named the Western Conference Finals MVP, and San Antonio was back in the NBA Finals for the first time since 2014.

The Finals did not go the Spurs' way. The New York Knicks won Game 1, 105 to 95. They won the series, 4 games to 1, between June 3 and June 13. Jalen Brunson of the Knicks was named Finals MVP, the award for the best player in the series. San Antonio won Game 3 in

New York, 115 to 111, on June 8, and then lost the next two games. Across his 22 playoff games, Wembanyama blocked 78 shots. That is 3.5 a game. The Spurs had won the West, and the Knicks won the title.

The new season began in October 2026. On November 4, the Spurs hosted Dallas. Wembanyama scored 52 points, made 16 of his 28 shots, grabbed 24 rebounds and blocked 8 shots. He also made 19 of 23 free throws. The Spurs won by one point, 112 to 111. The Spurs were 6 wins and 2 losses on the young season, and through that night Wembanyama had played 8 games and was averaging 4.5 blocks. Eight games is a small sample. It is still the job he talked about.

Questions

1. What made the 2026 Defensive Player of the Year vote for Wembanyama different from every earlier vote?

A. He got every first-place vote
B. He was the oldest winner
C. He won it in his first season

2. What does the night of his 12 blocks show about a record?

A. It always means the team will win
B. A record can come on a night that ends in a loss
C. It only counts in the regular season

3. The book says a defender may not touch a ball 'above the rim, inside the imaginary cylinder.' What does imaginary mean?

A. Painted on the court
B. Made of glass
C. Only pictured, not real

4. Which measurement of Wembanyama has been published only as a report, not an official figure?

A. His wingspan
B. His draft position
C. His official height without shoes

5. What did ESPN report about shots against the Spurs when Wembanyama was on the court?

A. They were taken from closer to the rim
B. They came from farther away than with any other player in the NBA
C. They were taken less often than anywhere else

Words to know

unanimous: all agreeing
wingspan: arm width
rookie: first-year player
goaltending: illegal touch
sample: small part

Answer key: Victor Wembanyama and the Unanimous Vote

1. A. He got every first-place vote
2. B. A record can come on a night that ends in a loss
3. C. Only pictured, not real
4. A. His wingspan
5. B. They came from farther away than with any other player in the NBA